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INFO RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 0662
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RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA SCJS SEOUL KOR PRIORITY
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J5 SEOUL KOR PRIORITY
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J2 SEOUL KOR PRIORITY
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001475

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/02/2016
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SUBJECT: JAPANESE AMBASSADOR ON LIANCOURT ROCKS

Classified By: Ambassador Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (B/D)

11. (c) Summary: In a May 2 luncheon meeting with the Ambassador, Japanese Ambassador Shotaro Oshima said that Tokyo wanted a quiet, diplomatic resolution to the Liancourt Rocks (Dokdo/Takeshima) dispute. One encouraging sign was that FM Ban Ki-moon was positively inclined to meet with Japanese FM Aso on the margins of the Asian Cooperation Dialogue in Doha later this month, and had taken a low-key approach with visiting VFM Shiozaki. Still, Oshima assessed, these diplomatic efforts might not be enough, because if South Korea dispatched survey vessels to the disputed EEZ in July, as already announced, Japan would have to react just as strongly as the South Koreans had done in the recent standoff. The Ambassador said that Washington had been pleased that diplomatic efforts were successful in avoiding a direct confrontation. The United States was not taking a position on the territorial dispute, but wanted to see a conflict avoided. Perhaps, the upcoming EEZ talks could further defuse the tensions, the Ambassador said. End Summary.

Liancourt Rocks: Not a History Issue

12. (c) On May 2, Japanese Ambassador to the ROK Shotaro Oshima briefed the Ambassador on the recent developments over the Liancourt Rocks dispute. The territorial dispute was entirely separate from the so-called history issues, Oshima said, because for centuries, Japan had control over the islets, certainly well before the Japanese occupation of Korea. Japan had just as valid claims as Korea and it was misleading for President Roh to associate the islets with Japanese occupation and colonization of the Korean Peninsula, according to Oshima.

Quiet Diplomacy Needed

13. (c) Oshima said that diplomatic efforts had produced a temporary solution. This was not easy. In fact, VFM Yachi, who had made the agreement ten days ago with ROK VFM Yu Myung-hwan, had all but admitted failure. However, after talking one last time with Cabinet Minister Abe (not FM Aso), Yachi was able to close the deal. Senior VFM Shiozaki, still in town, was also able to make further progress. His meeting with FM Ban had been a surprisingly quiet affair, with both sides stating their position dispassionately. Shiozaki and Ban agreed that the two nations should continue their diplomatic efforts; Ban agreed in principle to meet with Japanese FM Aso later in the month in Doha. For this meeting to materialize, both sides must tone down the rhetoric,

Oshima said.

14. (c) A big concern for the GOJ was the ROK's proposal to survey the disputed EEZ in July, Oshima said. The ROK side understood fully that Japan must react just as strongly as the Korean side had done to the proposed Japanese survey. For this reason, the ROKG interlocutors have told their Japanese counterparts not to take a position publicly on the Korean survey vessels, because to do so would only rile the Korean public, giving the ROKG no choice but to send the vessels. Oshima was pleased that ROK VFM Yu had skillfully sidestepped this question when it recently was posed by a journalist.

15. (c) The Ambassador said that Washington had been pleased to see that the diplomatic efforts of VFMs Yachi and Yu had managed to avoid a confrontation between our two allies. The United States did not take sides in the territorial dispute, but very much wanted to see continued diplomatic efforts toward a peaceful resolution; perhaps the proposed EEZ talks could provide such a venue, with a view to arriving at a compromise solution on each country's EEZ without prejudice to either side's legal position on the islets dispute.

16. (c) Oshima said that theoretically the EEZ issue could be separated from the territorial dispute over the Liancourt Rocks. Such a separation had been made in the dispute over fishing rights, allowing the two sides to reach an agreement in 1998. However, practically, as EEZ lines were drawn from claimed territories, such a separation would be hard, Oshima assessed. This was because the ROK EEZ, while drawn from Ulleungdo, encompassed Dokdo, and the Japanese could not accept an EEZ that did not include Takeshima.

17. (c) COMMENT: There is, of course, no way that either Tokyo or Seoul can give up claims over the islets. The challenge, therefore, is for both parties to find a modus vivendi that enables them to put up and live with an unresolved issue. This is proving to be increasingly difficult, especially given the heightened media interest, not to mention the underlying posturing associated with growing nationalist sentiments on both sides of the sea. Oshima is right to be pessimistic, because it is only a matter of time until the next flare-up, which could be as early as July. END COMMENT.
VERSHBOW